

## 《The Tale of Genji: A Japanese Classic Illuminated》

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Metropolitan Museum of Art

1000 5th Ave, New York

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*The Tale of Genji: A Japanese Classic Illuminated*<sup>1</sup> is the first major loan exhibition in North America to focus on the artistic tradition inspired by Japan's most celebrated work of literature. Written by Murasaki Shikibu, a lady-in-waiting in the early eleventh-century imperial court, and often referred to as the world's first psychological novel, the tale recounts the life of the son of an emperor, the "radiant Genji," while introducing some of the most iconic female characters in



fig. 1

the history of Japanese literature. Covering the period from the eleventh century to the present, the exhibition features more than 120 works, and some 50 objects borrowed from museums, temples, and private collections throughout Japan, including two National Treasures and several Important Cultural Properties.

Instead of attempting to narrate a story that consists of 54 chapters and some 1300 pages in English translation, the exhibition presents the diversity of ways that *The Tale of Genji* was interpreted over the past one

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<sup>1</sup> Co-curated by the author with John T. Carpenter, Mary Griggs Burke Curator of Japanese Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, along with Monika Bincsik, Diane and Arthur Abbey Assistant Curator for Japanese Decorative Arts at The Met; and Kyoko Kinoshita, Professor of Japanese Art History at Tama Art University.

thousand years. Ten separate rooms that make up the Arts of Japan galleries at the Met bring together the most historically important and artistically powerful *Genji* paintings, calligraphy, robes, lacquer works, and graphic arts, many shown for the first time outside of Japan. The galleries are organized thematically, each room designed to show a different aspect of a millennium of engagement with this book.



fig.2

The exhibition emphasizes for the first time the Buddhist reception of *The Tale of Genji*. From early on, the epic tale was viewed as a miracle, with most people asking how a mere mortal could have created such a masterpiece. A longstanding legend describes Murasaki Shikibu receiving divine inspiration from the bodhisattva Nyoirin Kannon at Ishiyamadera Temple, where she meditated on the moon's glittering reflection on the waters of Lake Biwa and suddenly saw the chapters materialize before her. Murasaki Shikibu herself soon came to be worshipped as a manifestation of Kannon who had appeared as a court lady to write a tale that could put readers on a path to Buddhist awareness. Numerous stunning portrait-icons of the author (as in the poster image for the exhibition, fig. 1) speak to the belief that *The Tale of Genji* could instill in readers the Buddhist principle of the illusory phenomenal world and the fleeting nature of existence. Others took the view that a tale of romance and seductive fictions needed sacralization, a conviction that resulted in some of the most sublime works of art that infuse imagery of the tale and its genesis with Buddhist symbolism (fig. 2).

Powerful male rulers throughout history including Ashikaga and Tokugawa shoguns also understood the tale's charisma and used its imagery of a flourishing court culture for their own ends, demonstrated by numerous objects from bridal trousseau on display, including a lacquer and gold palanquin adorned with *Genji* paintings on its interior. These gorgeous objects from the Edo period (1615~1868) may seem like pure opulence, but at their core is a high-stakes need for political alliances forged through marriages that hinged upon savvy and faithful brides, educated in *The Tale of Genji*. Other paintings of the protagonist Genji depicted in exile on the windswept

shores of Suma emphasize the theme of Genji's political marginalization, showing how the tale could be read as protest literature against unjust regimes. What makes *The Tale of Genji* a work of world literature of the first order, however, is its capacity to be appreciated on many different levels. Frightful demon Noh masks and parodies in the graphic arts for example reveal how the tale was mined for its melodrama, humor, and spine-tingling episodes of ghosts and spirit possession.

As a work written by a female author that highlights the voices of female characters, *The Tale of Genji* has historically always had a uniquely robust female readership. Women debated the strengths and faults of the characters that Murasaki Shikibu brought to life, and they created lively amateur handscroll paintings of the story in the medieval period that resemble manga and fan fiction. Professional female artists and writers also copied, illustrated, and even adapted the entire tale, and the exhibition displays more works by premodern Japanese female artists than any show in recent memory. The show concludes with the manga masterpiece *Asaki yumemishi* by Yamato Waki and a selection of her original paintings never exhibited before, with the hope that it will encourage more readers today to make *The Tale of Genji* their own.